

A Noise that Doesn't Stop

The train labors from two until four. Then rests until 4:15. The train labors from 4:15 until 6 or 6:30, maybe, but by then she doesn't pretend to sleep. The house is gabled, with the upstairs one long room with a crank-style window at each end. The room's only good for standing in the middle, so mostly it's the bedroom, which requires less standing around. At two the sound begins, not changing much if it seeps through the cracks or pushes waves against the panes. The steam exhales with a squeal, the engine throbs a bass cardiac beat, and instead of screeching on the tracks, as you might expect, the wheels say hush-hush-HUSH-hush down the line. What was a whistle is now more of a hum. The first night, exhausted from cleaning, she was deep asleep when the whistle blew. Lily went flying out of bed and smacked her head on the slanted ceiling. Hurt and confused, she puddled onto the floor and cried as the train lumbered on.

The house is perfect for one. Quite good for two, but only if they really liked each other. Downstairs holds a living area, empty as of yet, with red lacquer floor. It opens onto a concrete porch, stained in places, dripping in vines. The roof is covered in ivy, which sometimes pushes its way through the shingles and into the house. Most mornings, Lily can hear the squirrels scamper the length of the roof and take a flying leap into the lone peach tree. *Why red lacquer?* she wonders. *Maybe they wanted to bring some city sophistication here. Maybe an artist in a mad fit was so inspired. Maybe it's not lacquer at all.* She thinks about possible uses for a red-floored room when the train keeps her up nights, but by the morning she really can't remember any.

The bathroom is small. Everything is, actually, but it doesn't feel so bad. It's like being a guest in a very eccentric hotel – single serving soap, one set of towels, shower but no tub. There's a basement, too, into which Lily hasn't ventured. Her favorite room is the kitchen. Though she only changed the yellowed Battenberg curtains and replenishes pitchers of wildflowers, it seems much brighter. Someone had tacked butchers' paper over the kitchen walls and covered them in hand-drawn maps. In pencil and watercolor,

hundred of little islands and peninsulas, replete with lighthouses, pepper the walls. At first glance it appears to be the Eastern seaboard, but upon closer inspection the penciled names of the coves and such are unfamiliar. And that's it – that's the whole house.

Rent is cheap. Two seventy-five a month, all utilities paid. They wanted to keep the house in the family, but are fine to rent it for now. They cautioned her about not having a tub. They cautioned her that the stench of the barn carries over acres on breezy days. It's the wheat and milo she smells mostly. Warm and hop-full like a drafted beer. No one said anything about the train.

The other night it made a new sound. In the quiet space between 4:00 and 4:15, it sustained a pretty hum. Mmmmm, just like the alto section warming up. Then hush-hush it chugged again. It was light out when the train had passed. It was 6:47.

The train had passed, she thought. That can't be right. After four months of fitful nights she realized: a train can't just go on by for two-and-a-half hours. Unless it's a very long train, of course. Or a very slow train. Or many trains, one directly after the other.

In July, the train came at 11:30. It had been coming a little earlier, sustaining a little later, just by a few minutes, but still... This was early. She sensed its growing impatience. Sometimes Lily dreamed of a cranberry-colored knapsack, tied to a stick hobo-style. She didn't really have anything of sentiment to fill it with, but perhaps it was empty, just waiting to be filled. She dreamed of racing through the milo at night, fearless of the electricity of crickets, running for the boxcars. How far can you go? Nestled on a bag of grain to protect from bumpy tracks, the open car door a picture-window to the world: past farms and fields, changing plains of color, towards verdant valleys, through dark clusters of trees whose roots clawed for earth but only curled over eroding hillsides. To the salt in the middle of the sky and the sea.

The sun sets late in the summer. Almost ten. She had wheeled a galvanized trough to the porch and filled it halfway with the hose. The rest she added pot by pot from the stove.

The rust rings on the porch matched the makeshift bath. In another time it was used to ice bottled beer. When the farm had flourished, they told her, the extra hands had slept here. The porch was a summer kitchen. Lily envied those impervious workers who celebrated a hard day with hard drinking. Waking up the next morning to do it again. She stepped out of her sundress and pretzeled into the tub, stirring her knees to mix the disparate temperatures. A bath becomes a luxury in a dry state.

She should bathe in the day, really. The sun could warm the water and save the boiling. There was no need for modesty with the limited visitors. Jeremy carried a portion of groceries and bottled milk from the main house's delivery every Monday. Sometimes she would see Jeremy or Justin on the threshers, but it was too distant to tell which was which. At night, veiled by ivy anyhow, she could let her skin drink up. Add mint from the garden and it smells like a julep, add juniper and it could be gin. Time passed quickly waiting for the train.

As soon as night fell, you could hear it coming. Panting ah-ah-aah like a woman in the throes, and the whistle her relief. Light bathed the fields in amber and gold and bottle green, making those dry grains brilliant again. Time suspended. It was light out when the train finally passed. Late enough to burn off the haze and let the sky stretch in impeccable blue, but the water was still warm.

By August the train couldn't wait for night. It sustained late into the morning and started early in the evening, inching in on both sides until it was ceaseless sound. When Jeremy dropped by with sundries and a rum cake from his wife, she'd asked him about the train. *The noise must bother you, running so close to the house*, she said. *Maybe you just take it for granted, like the smell of grain or the dry heat*. Jeremy considered for a moment. *You can borrow the truck if you need to, Lily*, he offered, but then he backed off the porch, puzzled, forgetting to leave the cake.

The noise didn't stop. Like a pilgrim repeating the Jesus prayer, the train fervently repeated its mantra. Lily unclipped the kitchen curtain and smoothed it out. Peppermint

soap, an extra dress, toothbrush, comb, a small paper bag of peaches, an envelope of money, bottles of water, and a leather journal with photos pressed between the pages. She traced his face with her fingers and kissed an apology on the picture of John and their towheaded boy. *I tried to stop*, she whispered. *Honestly, I tried.*

Lily tied the bundle with kitchen twine, leaving two long loops to lasso over her shoulder. She rushed past the chittering squirrels, the buzz of the thresher. She rushed through the scratches of brambles and chiggers and milkweed silk. It was certain that through acres of grain she'd finally see her train. Oh, to be away from this place and away from that city too. *My train runs to the coast. It never stops.*

I tried to stop, she panted, *but I was just too thirsty here.*